Violence and Neighborhood Disadvantage after the Crime Decline

By

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Violent crime is known to be concentrated in the same urban neighborhoods as poverty and other forms of disadvantage. While U.S. violent crime has declined at an unprecedented rate over the past two decades, little is known about the spatial distribution of this decline within cities. Using longitudinal neighborhood crime data from six U.S. cities during the national crime decline, this article examines changes in (1) crime rates of neighborhoods grouped by their initial crime levels, poverty rates, and racial/ethnic makeups; (2) the neighborhood exposure to violence of urban residents classified by race/ethnicity and poverty status; and (3) the relative distribution of violent crime across urban neighborhoods. We find that crime levels declined the most in the initially most violent and disadvantaged neighborhoods and that exposure to violence fell the most among disadvantaged urban residents. Nonetheless, crime remained concentrated in cities’ initially most violent and disadvantaged locales.

Keywords: crime decline; neighborhood change; concentrated disadvantage; violent crime; urban inequality

Over the past 20 years, the United States has experienced the most sustained decline of violent crime in its modern history (Zimring 2008). The national rates of homicide and of all violent index crime have been cut roughly in half since the early 1990s. The drop in violence is visible in every source of data available, from official police statistics on homicides to victimization surveys conducted with

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ordinary Americans. No matter the data source, the decline of violent crime is staggering in its scale and duration.

Despite the evidence for how much violence has declined, little is known about where it has declined. The dearth of evidence on how the crime decline has been distributed across urban neighborhoods is a major gap in the literature. One of the most unique aspects of interpersonal violence is that it is geographically concentrated. Research conducted in multiple cities has shown that a disproportionate share of all violent crime takes place within an extremely small number of city blocks and neighborhoods (Braga, Papachristos, and Hureau 2010; Braga, Hureau, and Papachristos 2011; Weisburd et al. 2004). A converging strand of empirical research argues that the spatial concentration of violence may be a core mechanism leading to the reproduction of neighborhood inequality (Sharkey and Sampson, in press; Peterson and Krivo 2010; Sharkey 2010; Burdick-Will et al. 2011).

This research suggests that to explain and interpret the crime decline, it is necessary first to have a clear sense of the degree to which communities have been affected by it. If the decline of violent crime never reached the nation’s most disadvantaged neighborhoods, then “The Great American Crime Decline” (Zimring 2008) might be seen as yet another trend that has exacerbated neighborhood inequality. Alternatively, if the decline of violent crime was concentrated in the most disadvantaged neighborhoods, then the crime drop may have weakened one of the central mechanisms by which neighborhood inequality is maintained and reproduced.

To address these questions, this study analyzes trends in neighborhood-level violent index crime rates for six cities—Chicago, Cleveland, Denver, Philadelphia, St. Petersburg (Florida), and Seattle. These municipalities are not representative of U.S. cities but were selected because all have available data on neighborhood-level violent crime over a period of at least a decade. The data allow us to describe how the crime drop was distributed across neighborhoods within each city, and to answer questions about which neighborhoods and which populations experienced the greatest declines in violent crime.

The Nexus of Concentrated Disadvantage and Violence

Multiple forms of disadvantage, from poverty to family structure to disease to homicide, tend to come bundled together in urban neighborhoods (Kasarda 1993; Sampson and Morenoff 2006; Sampson 2012). This multifaceted disadvantage tends to be durable, with a rank ordering of urban neighborhood status that is remarkably stable over time (Sampson and Morenoff 2006; Sampson 2012).

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The multiple dimensions of neighborhood disadvantage are mutually reinforcing, constituting what some have referred to as a “poverty trap” (Bowles, Durlauf, and Hoff 2006; Sampson and Morenoff 2006; Sampson 2012).

From the 1960s through the 1990s, the rise of violent crime and the emergence of mass imprisonment led to a new concentration of violence and a strengthened spatial link among poverty, segregation, violence, and the criminal justice system (Hagan and Peterson 1995; Krivo and Peterson 1996; Peterson and Krivo 2010; Sampson 2012). Crime and neighborhood disinvestment reinforced each other to constitute a “spiral of decay” in high-poverty areas (Skogan 1990; see also Bursik 1986; Liska and Bellair 1995). An extensive literature documents how the spatial concentration of poverty, violence, aggressive police oversight, and incarceration erode public life, compromising the capacity of neighborhood residents to achieve social cohesion and community organization (Clear 2009; Fagan and Meares 2008; Klinenberg 2003; Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls 1997).

Considering the tight link between violent crime and urban disadvantage, the dramatic drop in violent crime that has occurred since the 1990s has potentially important implications for our understanding of urban poverty and neighborhood inequality. Pope and Pope (2012) find a highly significant, negative relationship between change in property values and change in crime rates during the 1990s in U.S. urban zip codes. Ellen and O’Regan (2008) find that the greatest rates of economic growth during the 1990s occurred in urban neighborhoods with the highest proportions of black and poor residents, while these neighborhoods experienced the greatest economic losses as crime grew in the prior two decades. These authors hypothesize that the concentration in these neighborhoods of both the crime decline and the prior crime increase may help to account for these patterns. Prior research bolsters this hypothesis, demonstrating that increasing crime rates lead to losses of relatively affluent populations at both the neighborhood and city levels (Cullen and Levitt 1999; Morenoff and Sampson 1997).

To understand whether the decline of violent crime has reversed these patterns of disinvestment, decline, and out-migration, it is essential to analyze where crime has dropped within urban areas. Much of the existing literature on the magnitude of the crime decline has focused on measuring changes in crime commission or victimization rates among groups classified by age, gender, socioeconomic status, or race/ethnicity, or in large areas such as states or regions (Cook and Laub 2002; Zimring 2008). Less attention has been devoted to the spatial dimensions of the crime decline within cities. Studying crime trends in Cleveland and Denver, Ellen and O’Regan (2009) establish that neighborhoods in these cities with the greatest proportions of minority residents experienced the greatest crime declines in the 1990s, and that neighborhood-level exposure to violent crime fell most among these cities’ poor and minority residents. A recent line of research—conducted on the level of street segments and intersections (so-called microplaces)—has made groundbreaking advances in our understanding of the degree to which the crime decline and the prior incidence of violent crime were localized within cities (Braga, Papachristos, and Hureau 2010; Braga, Hureau,
This research finds that a majority of violent incidents in Boston and Seattle were concentrated in a relative handful of microplaces. A paradoxical pattern of change and stability characterized the crime decline in Boston’s most violent microplaces. Even as much of the city’s declines in gun violence and robbery occurred in these locales, Boston’s gun violence and robbery incidents remained concentrated in these microplaces after the declines.

This study adds to this evidence base by considering how the crime decline has been experienced across neighborhoods and across populations characterized by economic status and by race and ethnicity. We describe the degree of change in violent crime in six cities, tracking violent crime at the neighborhood level for at least a decade in all cities. As described in the following section, we consider the absolute and relative decline of violent crime, changes in different types of neighborhoods and for different segments of urban populations, and change and stability in the spatial distribution of violence. We explore implications of these patterns for future research on broader social conditions in disadvantaged neighborhoods and for policies to reverse cycles of decay and disinvestment from which these neighborhoods have previously suffered.

Data and Methods

Analytic approach

The analysis is carried out in three sections. The first section consists of a neighborhood-level analysis examining where the decline in violent crime was concentrated within cities. Each city’s neighborhoods are first divided into quintiles based on their initial violent crime rates. For each quintile in each year of the data, a violent index crime rate—expressed as the number of crimes per 10,000 residents—is calculated by dividing the total number of such crimes occurring in the quintile’s neighborhoods by the total number of residents of these neighborhoods, and multiplying the resulting quotient by 10,000. The amount of change in this rate, from the data’s initial year to its final year, is compared for each city’s most violent quintile and its remainder. Each city’s neighborhoods are then divided into a group of “poor” and a group of “nonpoor” neighborhoods, based on whether at least 30 percent of their residents were in poverty during the data’s initial year. A violent index crime rate is calculated for each of these groups in each year of the data. The amount of change in this rate, from the data’s initial to its final year, is compared for each city’s poor and nonpoor neighborhoods. Finally, each city’s neighborhoods are divided according to whether blacks, Hispanics, or non-Hispanic whites constituted a majority of their populations in the data’s first year, or are designated as “other” if none of these groups made up a majority. Annual violent index crime rates are calculated for each set of neighborhoods, and the amount of change, from the data’s initial to its final year, is compared for each set.
The second section considers change in the rate at which different groups of individuals were exposed to violent crime within their neighborhoods from the data’s initial year to its final year. Changes in exposure to neighborhood violent crime are examined based on poverty status (poor and nonpoor residents), and on race/ethnicity (non-Hispanic black, Hispanic, and non-Hispanic white populations). The measure of exposure is defined as the sum of the violent crime rates of all of the city’s neighborhoods, with each neighborhood rate weighted by the number of group members residing in that place. This definition can be expressed in symbolic form as \( \sum_{j=1}^{n} (V_j \times (P_j / P_t)) \), where each \( V_j \) is the violent crime rate of one of the \( n \) neighborhoods in the city; \( P_j \) is the population in that neighborhood of the group for which the exposure rate is being calculated; and \( P_t \) is the group’s population in the city as a whole.

The final section analyzes how the crime decline affected the distribution of violence across the neighborhoods of each city. The correlation is measured between the initial and final violent crime rates of the neighborhoods in each city. These rates are logged to prevent extreme or outlying values from having a disproportionate influence on results. The correlation coefficient provides one measure of the stability or change in the distribution of these neighborhoods’ crime rates. Each city’s neighborhoods are then divided into quintiles by their violent crime rates in the data’s initial year and final year, respectively. Transition matrices are used to display the degree of change in the relative position of neighborhoods within a city in terms of violent crime. Specifically, we focus on the proportions of neighborhoods that began in the most or least violent quintile and remained there at the end of the timeframe under study.

Data

We analyze data on the violent index crime rates of the neighborhoods within six cities—Chicago, Cleveland, Denver, Philadelphia, St. Petersburg, and Seattle. These cities were selected because neighborhood-level crime data covering a period of at least a decade during the national crime decline are publicly available for each. Violent index crimes, as defined by the FBI, consist of intentional homicides, robberies, rapes, and aggravated assaults. A neighborhood's violent index crime rate consists of the number of such crimes occurring within its boundaries per 10,000 neighborhood residents. Because each city’s crime data are derived from a different local source, there are inconsistencies between cities in terms of the years and crimes for which data are available, as well as the definitions of “neighborhoods.”

Data spanning just over a decade are given for four cities: Chicago, Philadelphia, St. Petersburg, and Seattle. The time periods covered by these municipalities’ data are, respectively, 2001 to 2012, 1998 to 2009, 2000 to 2012, and 1996 to 2007. For the remaining two cities, Cleveland and Denver, data span the period from 1990 to 2010. This study’s data tables and graphs display changes in Cleveland and Denver crime rates over the period from 1990 to 2010 and each of its constituent decades. This enables comparison of changes occurring in Cleveland and Denver and elsewhere over periods of similar duration. By
default, results for Cleveland and Denver that are discussed in the text concern 1990 to 2010.

Neighborhoods are defined as census tracts for all cities except Denver. The source for the Denver data (the Piton Foundation) divides this city into 77 neighborhoods, whereas the 2000 U.S. Census divides Denver into 136 tracts. We believe that the benefits of adding this city to our dataset outweigh any inconsistencies introduced into our analysis by the larger size of the neighborhood units for which data are available.

Homicides and rapes are not included in the Philadelphia crime counts provided by our data source. This omission is not expected to introduce substantial inconsistencies or distortions into our analysis, given that the omitted crimes constituted just 6 percent of all violent index crimes in Philadelphia during the period under analysis,\(^3\) and given the typically high degree of correlation between tract-level counts of the omitted crimes and of all violent index crimes. For instance, the correlation equals 0.9 (indicating an extremely strong linear relationship) between the total number of homicides and all violent index crimes occurring in Chicago tracts from 2001 to 2012, while that of the number of rapes and all violent index crimes is even stronger.

Demographic variables—namely population counts disaggregated by poverty status, race, and ethnicity—are derived from the same sources as the crime data for neighborhoods in Denver and Cleveland. For tracts in the other cities, these variables are derived from the U.S. censuses and American Community Survey five-year averages. These averages are treated as applying to the middle year in their five-year span. Annual values of demographic variables, for years between those for which they are provided by these data sources, are calculated via linear interpolation.

Longitudinal analysis of neighborhood-level data over multiple decades poses challenges due to changes in tract boundary definitions in each decennial census. These challenges do not apply to the Cleveland and Denver data, because the sources from which they are derived use consistent neighborhood boundaries throughout the periods they cover. Tract boundary changes in Seattle and St. Petersburg are minor over the periods covered by their crime data. Data for each of these cities was manually adjusted to conform to a uniform set of tract boundaries. Challenges posed by tract boundary changes in Chicago and Philadelphia are more substantial. See the online methodological appendix for a detailed discussion of adjustments made to these cities’ data to facilitate the longitudinal analysis of their neighborhood crime rates.\(^4\)

**Results**

*Where did violent crime decline? A neighborhood-level analysis*

The analysis presented in Table 1 shows the absolute and proportional changes in violent crime rates for the most violent quintile of neighborhoods (as of the baseline year) and the remainder of each city’s neighborhoods. Absolute declines
Crime Decline and Neighborhoods

In violent crime in each city’s most violent neighborhoods far outstripped the changes in violent crime occurring in their remainders. For example, from 2001 to 2012 the violent crime rate in Chicago’s most violent neighborhoods dropped by 110 crimes per 10,000 residents, whereas the rate of violent crime dropped by 32 crimes per 10,000 residents in the remainder of the city.

Due to the large declines in the absolute levels of violent crime in each city’s most violent neighborhoods, there was a convergence in violent crime rates between the most violent neighborhoods of each city and the rest of its neighborhoods. The absolute difference in violent crime rates between each city’s most violent neighborhoods and all other neighborhoods shrunk by between 28 percent for Chicago and 65 percent for Cleveland during the years covered by the data.

Table 1
Change in Violent Crime Rates of Neighborhoods Grouped by Initial Violent Crime Levels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Time Period</th>
<th>Absolute Change</th>
<th>Relative Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Highest Quintile</td>
<td>Remainder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>2001–2012</td>
<td>−109.67</td>
<td>−32.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleveland</td>
<td>1990–2010</td>
<td>−175.83</td>
<td>19.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleveland</td>
<td>1990–2000</td>
<td>−177.00</td>
<td>−7.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clevelanda</td>
<td>2000–2010</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>26.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denver</td>
<td>1990–2010</td>
<td>−95.42</td>
<td>−10.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denver</td>
<td>1990–2000</td>
<td>−83.47</td>
<td>−16.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denver</td>
<td>2000–2010</td>
<td>−11.95</td>
<td>5.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philadelphia</td>
<td>1998–2009</td>
<td>−62.65</td>
<td>−2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Petersburg</td>
<td>2000–2012</td>
<td>−202.31</td>
<td>−41.31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. Although the count of violent incidents in Cleveland was roughly stable from 2000 to 2010, the city experienced a major loss of population in these years that resulted in an increase of its overall violent crime rate.

Note: Neighborhoods are grouped into quintiles of roughly equal population sizes by their initial violent crime rates. The “highest quintile” consists of the neighborhoods with the highest initial rates, while the “remainder” consists of those outside the highest quintile. Absolute change is the difference between the crime rates in the last and first years of the specified time period. Relative change is this difference as a percentage of the first year’s crime rate. To reduce the impact of anomalous annual crime rates on results, multiyear averages of initial crime rates are used to divide the neighborhoods into quintiles. See the online appendix (http://ann.sagepub.com/supplemental) for graphs of change in cities’ neighborhood crime rates, for neighborhoods grouped by initial crime rates, poverty levels, and racial/ethnic makeup.
The columns of results focusing on absolute levels of violent crime give equal weight to every incident of violent crime. The second set of columns shows the declines in violent crime rates in proportional terms, or relative to initial rates. In Chicago, Seattle, and St. Petersburg, the proportional decline of violent crime was roughly equivalent in the cities’ most violent neighborhoods and in the remainder of the cities’ neighborhoods. In Cleveland, Denver, and Philadelphia, the proportional decline in the most violent quintile of neighborhoods was substantially larger than that in the remainder of neighborhoods. Indeed, in both Cleveland and Philadelphia, all or nearly all of the drop in violent crime was concentrated in the cities’ most violent neighborhoods.

The analysis presented in Table 2 repeats that of Table 1, but for neighborhoods classified by their initial poverty status rather than their initial violent crime rates. The absolute decline in violent crime in each city’s poor neighborhoods far exceeded that in its nonpoor neighborhoods. For example, the decline was more than 120 crimes per 10,000 residents in Seattle’s poor tracts, compared with only about 15 crimes per 10,000 residents elsewhere. Proportional declines in violent crime were roughly similar in poor and nonpoor tracts in Chicago and St. Petersburg. In contrast, the percentage drops in violent crime in the remaining four cities were substantially greater in poor neighborhoods.

The violent crime rate was initially higher in each city’s poor neighborhoods than in its remainder. The larger absolute decline in violent crime in each city’s poor neighborhoods thus means that there was a convergence in crime levels among poor and nonpoor neighborhoods. The absolute difference in violent crime rates between each city’s poor and nonpoor neighborhoods shrunk by between 23 percent for Philadelphia and 54 percent for Denver.
The analysis in Table 3 repeats those in Table 1 and Table 2, but for neighborhoods grouped by their majority racial/ethnic compositions. Results are excluded for a racial/ethnic category when the city contains no more than two neighborhoods (with available crime data) falling into that category. On this basis, results are given for majority-black neighborhoods in all cities except Seattle. In these cities, the absolute decline in violent crime in majority-black neighborhoods far exceeded that in majority-white neighborhoods. For instance, Chicago’s majority-black neighborhoods experienced a decline of 74 violent crimes per 10,000 residents, versus 19 per 10,000 in its majority-white tracts. In two cities, Cleveland and Philadelphia, violent crime increased in majority-white neighborhoods while falling in majority-black tracts. Results are provided for majority-Hispanic neighborhoods in Chicago, Denver, and Philadelphia. In these cities, majority-Hispanic neighborhoods experienced greater absolute declines in violent crime than majority-white neighborhoods.

The violent crime rate was initially higher in each city’s majority-black and majority-Hispanic neighborhoods than in its majority-white neighborhoods. The absolute difference in violent crime rates between each city’s majority-white and majority-black neighborhoods subsequently shrunk by between 24 percent for

### Table 3
Change in Violent Crime Rates of Neighborhoods Grouped by Racial/Ethnic Composition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Time Period</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cleveland</td>
<td>1990–2010</td>
<td>20.23</td>
<td>-55.78</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>-96.40</td>
<td>20.84</td>
<td>-23.36</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>-40.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleveland</td>
<td>1990–2000</td>
<td>2.68</td>
<td>-88.23</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>-104.30</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td>-36.95</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>-43.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleveland</td>
<td>2000–2010</td>
<td>17.55</td>
<td>32.45</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>7.90</td>
<td>17.60</td>
<td>21.55</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>5.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denver</td>
<td>1990–2010</td>
<td>-10.10</td>
<td>-60.28</td>
<td>-33.63</td>
<td>-170.71</td>
<td>-19.26</td>
<td>-54.72</td>
<td>-31.08</td>
<td>-64.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denver</td>
<td>2000–2010</td>
<td>7.83</td>
<td>-6.61</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>-39.13</td>
<td>22.69</td>
<td>-11.69</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>-29.84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. Although the average crime rate of a city’s majority-black neighborhoods typically exceeds that of its majority-Hispanic neighborhoods, the reverse holds in Philadelphia. The majority-Hispanic neighborhoods in Philadelphia (n = 16) are exceptionally disadvantaged. Their average poverty rate exceeded 50 percent in 2000, versus 29 percent in Philadelphia’s majority-black neighborhoods (n = 146).

NOTE: Neighborhoods are classified according to whether non-Hispanic whites, non-Hispanic blacks, or Hispanics make up a majority of their populations in the data’s initial year, or as “other” if none constitutes a majority. Results are excluded for categories containing two or fewer neighborhoods with available data.
Chicago and 87 percent for Denver, while that between majority-white and majority-Hispanic neighborhoods shrunk by between 38 percent for Philadelphia and 45 percent for Chicago.

Although absolute declines in violent crime were greater in majority-black than majority-white neighborhoods in all cities, majority-white neighborhoods saw greater proportional declines in two cities: Chicago and St. Petersburg. In the remaining cities, proportional declines were greater in majority-black than majority-white neighborhoods. Proportional declines were greater in majority-Hispanic than in majority-white neighborhoods in all three cities that had results for majority-Hispanic neighborhoods.

The most violent, disadvantaged neighborhoods within the cities experienced declines in violent crime that were as large as, or larger than, those of the cities’ remainders. This is true regardless of whether neighborhoods are divided by their initial violent crime rates, poverty levels, or racial/ethnic compositions. Still, in all cities, the most violent quintile of neighborhoods continued to experience higher crime levels, in the data’s final year, than had the second most violent quintile in the initial year. The same applies to poor relative to nonpoor neighborhoods and to majority-black (in all cities but Denver) and majority-Hispanic relative to majority-white neighborhoods. In other words, even after the crime declines depicted here, the cities’ worst-off neighborhoods had more violent crime than other neighborhoods had before this decline.

Who experienced the crime decline? A group-level analysis

In this section, we analyze how these changes in violent crime rates translated into shifts in individuals’ exposure to violent crime in their neighborhoods.

As depicted in Figure 1, exposure to violent crime of each city’s poor and nonpoor residents declined over the period covered by the data. The decline experienced by poor residents was, however, greater than that experienced by nonpoor residents in each case. For example, exposure of the poor residents of Seattle declined by 50 incidents per 10,000 residents, while that of its nonpoor residents declined by only 17 incidents. The number of violent incidents by which the exposure rate of each city’s poor residents declined is at least 1.7 times greater than that by which the exposure rate of its nonpoor residents dropped.

The greater magnitude of the declines affecting poor residents means that there was a convergence in the number of violent crimes to which poor and nonpoor residents were exposed. Poor residents of each city were initially exposed to at least 54 (for Philadelphia) and at most 128 (for St. Petersburg) more violent incidents per 10,000 residents than nonpoor residents. In the data’s final year, this difference exceeds 50 incidents per 10,000 residents in just one city, St. Petersburg. In four cities—Cleveland, Denver, Seattle, and St. Petersburg—this difference shrunk by at least half of its initial level. In the remaining two cities, Chicago and Philadelphia, it declined by substantial proportions, 41 percent and 26 percent, respectively. For all cities but Cleveland and Philadelphia, the poor were exposed to about as much violent crime in the data’s final year as were the nonpoor in the data’s initial year.
Each city’s poor residents experienced a greater proportional drop in exposure to violent crime (measured relative to its initial rate of exposure) than its nonpoor residents. In three cities—Chicago, Philadelphia, and St. Petersburg—the proportional change for poor residents is only slightly greater than that for nonpoor residents. In the remaining cities—Cleveland, Denver, and Seattle—the proportional change is at least 1.5 times greater for poor residents than for nonpoor residents.

Initial and final exposure to violent crime of individuals classified by race/ethnicity is displayed in Figure 2. In all cities, exposure to violent crime fell for
both African Americans and Hispanics. Exposure of whites also fell in five of the six cities but increased in Cleveland. In the five cities, the declines experienced by African Americans were at least double the magnitude of those experienced by whites, as were the declines experienced by Hispanics in four of the five cities (the exception being St. Petersburg).

The greater magnitudes of the declines experienced by African Americans and Hispanics indicate that there was a convergence in the number of violent crimes to which African Americans and whites, as well as Hispanics and whites, were exposed. The disparity in exposure to violent crime between whites and African

**FIGURE 2**

Average Neighborhood Exposure to Violent Crime of City Residents, by Race/Ethnicity

**NOTE:** The average neighborhood exposure rate to violent crime of a white, black, or Hispanic resident is the average amount of violent crime occurring in the neighborhood of such a resident. See the main text for the formula by which this average rate is calculated. When demographic data were not available for the initial or final years of crime data, the most proximate available demographic data were used in weighting neighborhood crime rates to calculate these averages.
Americans shrunk by between 24 percent for Chicago and 95 percent for Denver during the years covered by the data. The disparity in the exposure between whites and Hispanics shrunk by between 35 percent for Philadelphia and 90 percent for Denver. Nonetheless, in all cities except Denver, African Americans were exposed to more crime in the data’s final year than were whites in their initial year. In all cities but Denver and St. Petersburg, Hispanics were likewise exposed to more crime in the data’s final year than were whites in their initial year.

While absolute declines in the exposure rates of African Americans and Hispanics to violent crime exceed those for whites in all cities, the same does not hold regarding proportional declines. In St. Petersburg, for instance, the proportional decline for African Americans approximately equals that for whites. In Chicago, the proportional decline for African Americans is less than that for whites, even as the absolute decline for African Americans far exceeds that for whites. This is because Chicago’s African Americans were initially exposed to violent crime at about four times the rate of whites.

The greatest beneficiaries of the crime decline, in terms of reduced exposure to violent crime, were poor and minority individuals. The neighborhood crime levels experienced by members of disadvantaged groups came to more closely resemble those experienced by everyone else. Still the exposure of each city’s poor residents did not fall substantially below that which its nonpoor residents had experienced before the crime decline. The same applies to each city’s black and (in most cases) Hispanic residents in relation to whites.

Change and stability in the spatial distribution of violent crime

Even as crime rates fell most in cities’ most violent neighborhoods and exposure to crime fell most among disadvantaged urban residents, key relationships characterizing the spatial concentration of crime within cities, and linking crime with disadvantage, remained intact. There is a very strong correlation between the initial and final violent crime rates of the neighborhoods in each city. The coefficients ($R$) for these correlations range from 0.76 in Cleveland to 0.93 in Seattle and exceed 0.85 in all cities except Cleveland. These results indicate that, in each city, neighborhoods’ initial violent crime rates strongly predict, or explain most of the variation in, their rates in the data’s final year. There was little change in the relative distribution of violent crime across the cities’ neighborhoods during the periods under analysis.

As a result, the neighborhoods within each city that were most violent before that city’s crime decline largely remained most violent afterward. The same holds for those that were initially least violent. Table 4 displays the proportion of each city’s neighborhoods, among the quintile of its neighborhoods having the highest initial violent crime rates, that were also in the most violent quintile in the data’s final period. The same information is also displayed, for comparison, with respect to each city’s quintile of neighborhoods having the lowest initial rates. In four cities—Chicago, Denver, Seattle, and St. Petersburg—at least 80 percent of the neighborhoods that were initially in the most violent quintile remained in this quintile in the data’s final year. In the remaining cities—Cleveland and
Philadelphia—approximately two-thirds of the initially most violent neighborhoods remained so in the data’s final year. In half of the cities—Denver, Seattle, and St. Petersburg—every neighborhood initially in the most violent quintile fell into either the most or second-most violent quintile in the data’s final year. About two-thirds to three-quarters of each city’s neighborhoods that were initially in the least violent quintile were also in this quintile in the data’s final year.

Violent crime dropped the most in the cities’ initially most violent and disadvantaged neighborhoods, but this decline has not amounted to a substantial redistribution of violent crime within these cities. In each city, the initially most violent quintile had more violent crime in the data’s final year, or after this city’s crime decline, than did the second-most violent quintile in the data’s initially year, prior to the decline. The neighborhoods where poor and minority populations are concentrated likewise continue to be those where violent crime is concentrated. It has been possible for violent crime to drop the most in the initially most violent and disadvantaged places, yet also remain concentrated in these places, because crime rates were initially so elevated in these places relative to the remainder of the cities. Indeed, in all cities except Philadelphia, the violent crime rate of the most violent quintile in the data’s first year approached or exceeded twice that of the second-most violent quintile and was more than five times greater than the average of the three least violent quintiles’ rates.

### Concentrated Disadvantage and Violence after the Crime Decline

At the outset of the time periods under study, the most violent neighborhoods in each city stood apart from the city’s remaining neighborhoods. The burden of violence was not spread evenly across each city, but rather was concentrated...
within a small segment of neighborhoods that were characterized by racial and ethnic segregation and poverty. The clear conclusion from our study is that the same places that featured the most severe concentrations of violence and poverty are the places that have changed the most. Further, the populations most affected by the problem of community violence have experienced the greatest changes over time.

Nonetheless, the analysis we present does not suggest that the spatial distribution of violence has been overturned over time. The decline of violent crime in these six cities served to ameliorate, but not to eliminate, socioeconomic and racial/ethnic disparities in community violence. The distribution of violent crime rates across each city’s neighborhoods showed little change, meaning that the communities that were initially most violent largely remained so. The linkages between the spatial concentrations of violence and disadvantage remained intact even if violence decreased.

The findings from this study should be considered in relation to the study’s limitations, which are primarily driven by data constraints. The study is conducted with data from a small number of cities that are not representative of American communities or cities, and the available data are not perfectly consistent across these six cities. Further, the timeframe of data availability differs across the six cities, and in some places our data do not cover the time period in which crime was declining the most. These constraints limit the types of general claims that can be made about which neighborhoods were most affected by the crime decline.

However, the consistency of patterns found across all of the cities does generate confidence in some basic claims about how the crime decline was distributed across neighborhoods. In every city we studied, the decline of violence in the most disadvantaged neighborhoods was at least as great—and usually much greater—than the decline of violence in the rest of the city. In some of these cities, like Cleveland, the drop in crime was experienced almost exclusively in the most violent neighborhoods. Across all six cities, the experience of urban disadvantage was transformed over the period under study. The connection among concentrated poverty, racial segregation, and violence was weakened, even if it was not severed.

This conclusion should provoke a shift in the study of urban poverty. For the past several decades, much of what we know about urban poverty has been learned in the context of rising crime and violence. In the aftermath of the crime decline, there are many places where daily life within areas of concentrated disadvantage is no longer dominated, to the same extent, by the threat of violence. Further research is now needed to assess whether the drop in the everyday threat of violence has altered patterns of interaction, parenting, social control, and community life within neighborhoods of concentrated disadvantage. Considering the extensive evidence base pointing to violence as a mechanism for neighborhood effects (see, e.g., Harding 2009), new research is necessary to explore whether the consequences of growing up in a poor, segregated neighborhood are different for those who have been raised in an era of declining violence.
Changes to neighborhood social life entailed by the crime decline must be assessed in the context of the massive expansion of the criminal justice system that has occurred at the same time as the crime decline. Patterns of increasing arrests and imprisonment, like those of declining crime, have been focused in urban neighborhoods of concentrated disadvantage. These punitive interventions, it has been argued, produce a range of collateral consequences entailing disruptions to family formation and cohesion, economic marginalization, and reductions in neighborhoods’ capacity to exercise informal social control (Clear 2009; Defina and Hannon 2013; Fagan and Meares 2008; Wildeman and Western 2010; Wildeman, Hacker, and Weaver 2014). Research on neighborhood effects after the crime decline must consider the outcomes of living in urban spaces subjected to reduced private violence but enduring formal surveillance and control.

Without losing sight of the social costs of mass incarceration, public policy discourse should focus on harnessing the potential for broader neighborhood investment and transformation made possible by declines in interpersonal violence. The public reputations of urban spaces as violent or disorderly are known to be more enduring than the actual incidence of high levels of violence or disorder in such places (Sampson 2012; see also Sampson and Raudenbush 2004). During the era of rising violent crime, areas of concentrated disadvantage experienced a vicious cycle of violence, disorder, disinvestment, and marginalization (Skogan 1990; Bursik 1986). In this era of relative peace, there is a new potential for a virtuous cycle of declining crime and disorder, reinvestment, and greater integration of disadvantaged neighborhoods into the urban social fabric.

Notes

1. This is a common threshold for classifying neighborhoods according to whether they have high poverty levels (see, e.g., Kingsley and Pettit 2003; Mather and Dupuis 2012).
2. See the online methodological appendix for a list of the data’s sources: http://ann.sagepub.com/supplemental.
3. This percentage is calculated using UCR crime counts for Philadelphia; see www.ucrdatatool.gov.
4. See http://ann.sagepub.com/supplemental.
5. It may be unsurprising that the absolute decline in violent crime was so much greater in each city’s initially most violent quintile, given that the initial violent crime rate of this quintile, in each city, was several times greater than that of the city’s remainder. The magnitude of the absolute decline in the latter is, of course, constrained by its relatively low initial crime level.
6. These correlations are of the logged violent crime rates, in the data’s initial and final years, of all neighborhoods with more than 200 residents. To reduce the impact on the results of anomalous annual crime rates, initial and final crime rates consist of multiyear averages of annual rates. Across each of the decades making up the time period of the Cleveland data (1990–2010), the coefficient equals approximately 0.85 for the correlation of initial and final neighborhood violent crime rates.

References


